

## 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Wilderness Act in 2004

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It has now been 40 years since the Wilderness Act was passed, and it is time to celebrate four decades of wilderness preservation and management, evaluate the condition of the wilderness system, and imagine where the next 40 years will take us. On September 3, 1964, Congress passed one of the most significant conservation laws of the last century: *"In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States . . . it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness."*

Wilderness is an anvil on which the American personality was forged. The Wilderness Act acknowledges our American frontier heritage and the role that wild lands played in the development of our character as a nation. It is in wild places that we are reminded of where we come from and our part in the natural world. Wilderness areas are invaluable reserves of clean air and water, and intact ecosystems and biodiversity. These wilderness lands represent a legacy that we leave to future generations for their use, enjoyment and inspiration.

The Wilderness Act was the culmination of many years of collaboration and work among conservation groups and Congress. Just like the idea of National Parks, a Wilderness Act was an American idea. The resulting law established a new standard of land conservation that has been adopted throughout the world to inspire new ways of thinking about protected areas of all kinds. *"The concept of wilderness – land and water where natural ecological processes operate as free of human influence as possible, and with primitive recreation opportunities and solitude – has spread from its American roots. Other nations – Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Finland, Sri Lanka, the former Soviet Union, and South Africa, for example – have also legislatively protected wilderness or comparable, strictly protected reserves. Additional countries, such as Italy, Zimbabwe, Namibia and the Philippines, although not enacting wilderness legislation, have declared wilderness zones in parks, municipal watersheds, game reserves, and forests."* (Chapter 3, International Wilderness, by Vance Martin and Alan Watson, in Wilderness Management 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2002, by John Hendee and Chad Dawson).

During 2004, we will be celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wilderness Act throughout the National Wilderness Preservation System. Not only are there parks with direct wilderness management responsibilities, but there are many cultural parks or historic sites that may have an affiliation with the history of the Wilderness Act even though they may have no land designation within their unit. When visiting these areas you can learn more about the benefits and values of our wilderness heritage. Wilderness lands are "devoted to the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use." They offer clean air and water, reservoirs of biodiversity, naturally functioning ecosystems, places for scientific inquiry, and places where visitors can hike, fish, hunt (where authorized), camp, adventure, watch wildlife, find spiritual renewal, enjoy scenic beauty, and experience solitude.

Parks through out the system are planning for interpretive, educational and other events during the coming year that will help celebrate this anniversary. There will be additional information and materials available during the year at parks and on this website. The best source for the latest news and events around the country is the Wilderness Network website at [www.wilderness.net](http://www.wilderness.net), which is operated jointly by the University of Montana and the four federal agencies who manage wilderness.

The National Park Service manages over 40% of the total National Wilderness Preservation System and over 50% of National Park Service lands are designated wilderness. We hope everyone will use this celebration as an opportunity to learn more about the benefits and values of wilderness, history of this system, the wilderness resources themselves, and the opportunities we have to collaborate and partner with others to further the purposes of our wilderness heritage.

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....President Lyndon B. Johnson, upon signing the Wilderness Act, 1964

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